



**California Institute  
of Integral Studies**

**International Journal of  
Transpersonal Studies**

Volume 27 | Issue 1

Article 13

1-1-2008

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## Recommended Citation

Salom, A. (2008). Salom, A. (2008). The therapeutic potentials of a museum visit. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 27(1), 98–103.. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 27 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2008.27.1.98>



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# The Therapeutic Potentials of a Museum Visit

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Museums are safe spaces for the objects they hold and for the persons that visit them, providing environments that can function in therapeutic ways. Within the wide range of objects, there is enough diversity to help guests discover what similarities they have with others as well as what makes them unique as individuals. Within exhibits, individuals can explore themselves through the reactions they have to particular pieces, through the observation of what holds their attention within the environment, and through the awareness and development of their contemplative mind. Museums can introduce transpersonal information, add information to previous transpersonal experiences, and even promote expanded states of awareness. With direction, guests can use museums to learn about themselves, thus optimizing the therapeutic potentials of these institutions.

Museums invite visitors to take a peek into the collective experience of human beings. Philippe de Montebello (2005), Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, described them, “quite literally and succinctly, as the memory of mankind.” They are, he said, “the repositories of precious objects and relics, the places where they are preserved, studied and displayed” (editorial page). Museums can provide an additional service: they can supply therapeutic experiences that can significantly impact our well-being if we place the emphasis in learning about ourselves through the contents in them.

## Supporting Therapeutic Encounters

### *A Safe Space*

The term museum comes from the Greek word *mouseion*, meaning “the shrine of the muses” (Halsey, 1977, p. 668). A muse, used as a noun, is defined as a “spirit or other source of genius or artistic inspiration;” its definition as a verb is “to think, reflect or meditate” (p. 668). As the roots of the word “museum” imply, museums are meant as places of meditation and contemplation.

The architectural boundaries of a museum (scale, lighting, temperature, circulation, display, etc.), along with the appraisals visitors make of these elements, mark a clear difference between the museum and the world outside of it. They propose a shift in behavior, cognition, and emotion. Many museums pose a spiritual quality

by inviting visitors into a slowed pace, subdued sounds, and an orderly visual experience. They adhere to a code of good behavior: visitors cannot destroy works that produce strong negative reactions in them, nor can they take home those that they adore. Exhibits are carefully organized, summoning the contemplative mind to come forth and perceive what is presented. This state of affairs is conducive to self awareness and insight.

Every single piece in a museum is valued and protected. This atmosphere of safety has the potential to create a sense of security in guests who visit, perhaps allowing them to risk experiences such as aloneness. At times, a private encounter can take place between one’s self and a particular piece of art, even as other people surround. The protective limits, created to optimize attention, bid the mind to expand beyond its usual internal dialogues, and be present with and in the environment.

### *Uniqueness and Tolerance of Differences*

At times I draw on the works of established artists for therapeutic interventions. A patient may think his or her art is not worthy because it is not sufficiently structured, it is too gloomy, empty, colorful, or unusual—or perhaps even too ordinary. Here, prints of well-known art work may come to the rescue. Patients who fear a lack of ability often dare to draw beginners’ scribbles after seeing pieces such as Andre Mason’s *Automatic Drawing*, a piece where the artist aimed at accessing his

unconditioned mind by making spontaneous marks on paper.

Even more impressive for patients is the diversity of pieces valued and displayed in museum installations. Witnessing the validity of uniquely personal expression, (as portrayed, for instance, in the juxtaposition of Twombly's *Lepanto* paintings and the *Don Juan de Austria* by Velazquez, at the Museo del Prado, two singular and very different artistic voices) reassures patients that it is not only his or her therapist who validates distinct personal expressions. It is also museums that authorize them, and museums, by preserving and interpreting our heritage, serve as symbols of society (MacDonald, 1989). The diversity of art shown in many collections can mirror our value as individuals with myriad and inimitable ways of expression. In this way, uniqueness is symbolically appreciated within a museum.

As the expression of uniqueness is validated, it affirms a multiplicity of possibilities in the manifestation of singularity. All types of art pieces cohabitate a wide range of exhibits. Both a modern print, like Lozowick's *New York*, and a piece from the Iron Age, such as *The Stanwick Horse Mask*, have their own special place. The dribbles of Pollok are valued, as are Pissarro's landscapes, Noguchi's stone sculptures, and Piero Della Francesca's linear perspectives. Themes, dimensions, materials, and techniques that are used in art, are as extensive as we are ourselves. Views of diverse customs, traditions, and values are presented through the direct communication provided by pieces of art themselves, as well as by means of explanatory description provided by the museum. Even diverse stages of consciousness are portrayed inside museums through the medium of artistic expression. Robbins (1987), stated that "form, texture, color, volume, space, movement, and abstraction...describe...the nonverbal aspects of ... internal representational life..." (p. 105), and give information about the artists' reality, feelings and ways of relating. Thus, art expresses diversities of consciousness, whether they be whole, realized, awake, spontaneous, (Wilber, 1996) or "instinctual, impulsive libidinous...[or] apelike" (p. 2). This affirmation of variety encourages tolerance of differences in others and in ourselves.

### **The Big Group**

With uniqueness may come the feeling of being different and secluded. Feeling separate and unlike others may lead to suffering. In my practice as an art therapist, and in my own personal life, I am

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constantly being faced with such suffering. There is pain and confusion, there are feelings of isolation, inadequacy, fear, shame, guilt, and regret. Yet as I watch patients courageously face their lives, there is a power towards growth in the exchange between patient and therapist, a dynamic that is both moving and humbling. The suffering allies with inner creative source in the search for ourselves through artistic form. As the suffering takes shape, so does our aliveness, our compassion, and our beauty.

Museums allow guests to see the artistic expressions of others who, like them, have explored the human experience with all its hues, textures, and tones, and then allowed these experiences to manifest in their work. By creating an atmosphere that houses expressions of all different states of mind, museums become optimal for exploring the concepts of "imparting information," "universality," and "installation of hope" that Yalom (1995) has described as therapeutic in his book, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*.

### *Imparting Information*

One of the reasons people go to museums is to acquire information. This information can give perspective to their daily obstacles. Visitors learn about the life stories of many artists who created artwork as they coped with distressing conditions. They discover that Monet painted his water lilies despite problems with his vision (Is It Art?, 1997), and that Kahlo painted much of her work from her bed, confined by the many surgeries that she underwent after a bus accident fractured her back. They learn that Matisse started to cut shapes instead of painting them because cancer forced him into a wheelchair, that Munch suffered from alcoholism, that Van Gogh had bipolar tendencies, that Hopper underwent acute loneliness, and that financial difficulties plagued Vermeer and Gauguin. The fact that these artists continued to search for meaning and reach for beauty in the face of adversity may inspire visitors to do the same.

### *Universality and Installation of Hope*

There is no human deed or thought that is fully outside the experience of other people" (Yalom, 1995, p. 6). This is clarified by studying the works of artists who have expressed concerns for and zeal towards situations that individuals can relate to in some way. Humanity's greatness and frailness are manifested in their art, partly documented and placed inside museums so that it can be shared. The sense of isolation is inevitably shaken in

the face of the realization that humans share so many common features. These can be seen in museum exhibits that evidence human similarities from beyond one's own time and place.

Beyond its common difficulties, humanity also share the possibility of resignifying its experiences. As de Montebello (2005) discussed the importance of museums, he stated that through them, one can learn about

mankind's awe-inspiring ability, time and again, to surpass itself...that no matter how bleak the times we may live in, we cannot wholly despair of the human condition . . . no matter the degree of chaos and adversity surrounding him, man has shown his ability to excel, to surpass. (editorial page)

The restorative factors of exploring our humanness through our collective art can be similar to the therapeutic factors of group therapy; in the former, the scale of the group simply becomes bigger. A sense of universality may be perceived in museums, and hope in humanity itself can be installed in visitors if museums are used as agents for the wellbeing of communities.

### **Using Museums Therapeutically**

#### *Identity and Particular Pieces*

In museums, people are exposed to material that offers new opportunities for them to discover themselves. Collective items surround us in collections, and this can ignite in us a sense of our distinctiveness. In the words of Carl Jung (1997), "If . . . contents (produced by the collective unconscious) remain unconscious, the individual is, in them, unconsciously commingled with other individuals, in other words, he is not differentiated, not individuated" (p. 71). Visitors may search for identity, a crucial aspect of individuation, as they intently experience museum galleries.

This quest for identity might come to rest on a particular piece. If a visitor is so touched by a piece that it is the only one they want to consider, and anything else would be distracting, he or she might ponder sincerely into the meaning of such an attraction. What is it that the piece provokes; what could the figures in it say in relation to their own life story; how do the colors stir their emotions and affect their internal dialogue; what memories, movements, or bodily sensations does it arouse? In this way, contemplation of a particular object may help individuals note unnoticed aspects of themselves.

#### *The Whole Environment*

Museums seek for clarity of perception by providing carefully chosen stimuli presented in controlled doses. This makes them advantageous environments for exploring the interaction between surroundings and their influence on inner life. Through the contemplative nature of the environment, visitors may be cued into an acute sensitivity that is beneficial for exploring the total setting and the parts that make it up: a beam of light, the chit-chat of nearby visitors, the lines on a painting, the smell of coffee, the view from a stairway. Museums can inspire guests to learn about a technique, explore certain themes, or delve into existential questions. They may rush by, pass leisure time, enthusiastically share experiences, or contemplate by themselves, seemingly alone in the infinity of the present moment.

I find that going to an exhibit with another person requires a lot of cooperation. Each visitor's rhythms, reactions, and desires become clear when in comparison to others. What wing of a museum are we interested in? How will we manage time through the galleries and at particular pieces? How much and in what way do we wish to talk about the work? What do we each need along the way? Who makes the decisions? Do we negotiate, concede, confront, or compromise?

Guests may move from one aspect of a show to the next, as they see fit. Perls (1973) described the humans capacity to discriminate, stating that "acceptance, and rejection of the environment, are the most important functions of the total personality. . . . Contact and withdrawal, in a rhythmic pattern, are our means of satisfying our needs, of continuing the ongoing process of life itself" (pp. 22-23). The museum experience can bring insight into the relationships with others and with the environment. I may inquire into what holds my attention, and how this attention accords with what I feel and think. I can explore the decisions I make as I move through a display to see whether I am choosing in accordance with myself, or in accordance with what I imagine the expectations of others to be.

#### *Letting Go*

As visitors walk through an exhibit, they may feel invited to let go of strong emotions and thoughts produced by one piece or aspect of a museum, in order to be able to experience whatever is coming next. This type of contemplation can help illustrate the process of "letting go" that is part of many schools of meditation. The therapeutic value of this is illustrated in the following words:

In meditation, you have the opportunity of easing your grip on all your preconceptions, images, and self importance, the opportunity of allowing them to fade away for a while and finding out that you are still there. The repeated experience of this builds trust that you do not have to figure life out or cling to a self-image, that you do not have to commandeer your own spirit, or jump to fix every problem you detect in yourself. (Walsh & Vaughan, 1996, p. 37)

Viewing a museum exhibit with this framework in mind can teach this contemplative skill by offering a structure within which to watch patterns of mental grasping and judging, and thereby support the process of relaxing the mind into the present.

### **Museums and Transpersonal Realms**

Museums can serve as vehicles for exploring the transpersonal realms in many ways. The objects inside museums are physical manifestations of the creative force that runs through humanity, whether or not the purpose of a particular creation was related to the sacred. These objects carry symbols, and

Real symbols...are not invented or made up, nor are they poetic or allegorical means to represent a known fact. On the contrary, they are numinous and autonomous products of the unconscious, expressions of unknown, that is unconscious, facts carrying an energy charge that can affect the psyche in drastic fashion. (Harding, 1961, p. 2)

As such, the objects are infused with creation, and viewers can potentially develop relationships with the pieces in which transpersonal consciousness can be explored.

### *Introducers of Transpersonal Information*

Exhibits may introduce spiritual traditions or lead to spiritual inquiry by engaging many of our senses with unique aliveness, allowing for integral learning experiences. As educational devices that introduce information, museums can motivate visitors into further investigation of different traditions and their experiential explorations, devotional paths, transcendental inquiries, and roads of service.

Moreover, the learning processes that museums initiate do not necessarily terminate at the end of an exhibit. After walking through the Oriental Museum at the University of Chicago, *The Human Headed Winged Bull* from Khorsabad and *The Bull's Head* from Persia

inspired me to explore the topic of "Power Animals" (Grof, 1993, pp. 148-150) in various cultures. After learning about Shamanic rites at the Museo del Oro in Bogotá, a friend explored a ritual with Yaje, the psychotropic plant of the Amazon. Though I saw them a long time ago, Klimt's *The Kiss*, with its depiction of union between man and woman, and Michelangelo's *Creation of Man*, representing for me the union with divinity, still confront me deeply; they are often in my mind. When I ask myself if I can unite as those images propose, my fears and desires arise, allowing for a re-investigation of my needs for intimacy and independence at many levels.

### *Adding to Previous Transpersonal Experiences*

During a Holotropic Breathing (cf. Grof, 1993, pp. 22-23) session, I had images of two beautiful women. One gracefully danced through my body; the other, powerful and frightening, surrounded me and performed rituals to destroy that which was no longer needed. I do not recall seeing these deities before, nor did I see them again until months later during a visit to the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City. I remembered my experience when I recognized the sculptures of Lakshmi and of Kali as the Hindu Goddesses who had appeared in my session and re-energized me. Seeing them in pictures and sculptures, learning their names, origins, stories, and qualities further explained my experience and reconnected me to a devotional feeling toward them. It was wonderful to realize that the goddesses of my experience existed past the limits of my own mind. At the museum I got a sense of what Grof was talking about when he wrote that

our individual consciousness connects us directly not only with our immediate environment and with various periods of our own past, but also with events that are far beyond the reach of our physical senses, extending into other historical times, into nature and into the cosmos...we can reach far back in time and witness sequences from the lives of our human and animal ancestors, as well as events that involved people from other historical periods and cultures with whom we have no genetic connection whatsoever. (p. 18)

While visiting a particular wing of the Château Neuf at Versailles, my mother experienced anxiety, oppression, and claustrophobia. This fact intrigued me without resolution until I learned about Grof's (1993)

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Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM): experiential patterns stored in memory that are thought to be connected to four stages in the biological process of delivery (pp. 28-29). Grof portrays the second of these matrices as follows:

The biological basis for BPM II is the termination of life in the womb and the encounter with uterine contractions...the entire world of the fetus is closing in and crushing it causing anxiety and great physical discomfort....A person experiencing a fully developed BPM II feels caged, caught in a claustrophobic nightmarish world....filled with terror, suffering, wars, epidemics, accidents and natural disaster. (pp. 46-48)

Years later I described this matrix for her, and she connected the description to her experience at Versailles. This suggested to me that the exhibit had somehow triggered my mother into accessing BPM II material.

#### *Kindlers of Transpersonal Experiences*

Museum visits can support expanded states of consciousness, for there are exhibits that have specific spiritual purposes. Such is the case of the Heart Shrine Relic Tour, which displays the relics left by enlightened Masters in their cremation ashes, pearl-like crystals believed to hold qualities of wisdom and compassion. Persons who have seen these relics report feeling peaceful and moved for days after attending the show. One visitor described the experience as “a reminder of the sacredness within” (Maitrei Project International, 2000-2008, n.p.).

Museum pieces need not belong to a particular spiritual tradition to sponsor a transpersonal experience. I sat at the middle of one of the original oval galleries of The Musee de l'Orangerie to watch Monet's *Water Lilies*. The dark lighting, the curved walls and the gallery's disposition permitted the *Water Lilies* to surround and soothe me with their beauty. I lost the sense of time and space. I forgot myself and went into deep states of relaxation. It could have been the symbol of the lilies floating on water that produced this expansion. Perhaps it was Monet's state of consciousness when drawing them that touched me. The colors and textures might have done the maneuver. What matters is that “images and metaphors present themselves as living psychic subjects” (Hillman, 1991, p. 48) and, since museums are filled with images, expanded states of awareness may result.

#### **Conclusion**

When discussing “art” versus “therapeutic art,” Arrington (2001) names the importance of a significant other (the therapist), and of a theoretical approach, as part of a therapeutic process. She states that therapeutic art “includes the client's intention, process, product, and the gestalt of the whole phenomenon of creating personal image” (pp. 105-108). I believe that similar elements are necessary to transform museum visits into therapeutic processes, and that that these processes can easily including transpersonal interventions.

The first steps toward therapeutic applications of museum visits have been taken, as is demonstrated by various collaborations. The Boston Museum of Modern Art has worked with Hearthstone, offering “short focused tours” of the museum's representational pieces for Alzheimer's patients (Kennedy, 2005). The Norton Priory Museum & Gardens collaborates with Astmoor Day Services, offering direct work with nature for adults with learning disabilities (Hayden, 2004). The Metropolitan Museum of Art offers educational workshops at social service agencies incorporated into art-based family programs facilitated by Free Arts NYC, an organization that works with abused children.

Art making, exhibiting, and museum involvement through work or volunteering can offer many benefits. Yet I do not believe that these are necessary for a therapeutic engagement with creativity; a simple visit to a museum can contribute to this purpose. In this light it would be beneficial to develop collaborative relationships with museums so that art therapists might have the opportunity to create a sufficient “holding environment” for their patients as they visit. A “holding environment,” as described by Robbins (1987), is “that space between patient and therapist in which [therapists] complement or mirror patients inner representational world” (p. 61), and in which “empathy is the basis of communication” (p. 27). This can be created inside museums as therapists and patients work empathically with the associations, feelings, and interpretations aroused by the museum experience to find meaning and insight. As they “hold” with a therapeutic framework in mind, art therapists can look after the gestalt of the museum experience itself, transforming the museum visit into a deeper affair.

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